

dead stars by orphan_account

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Alcohol Abuse/Alcoholism, Alternate Universe - Modern Setting, Angst, Anxiety, Anxiety Attacks, Blood, Claustrophobia, Depression, Eating Disorders, Flashbacks, Gender Dysphoria, Gender Identity, Gender Issues, I might have to add more haha, Implied/Referenced Self-Harm, Multi, Night Terrors, Nightmares, Other, Panic Attacks, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder - PTSD, Scars, Sexuality, Sexuality Crisis, Suicide Attempt, there are a lot of triggers in this fic oh my

Language: English

Characters: Eleven (Stranger Things), Jim "Chief" Hopper, Jonathan Byers, Joyce Byers, Mike Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Steve Harrington, Will Byers

Relationships: Eleven/Mike Wheeler, Will Byers/Eleven, Will Byers/Eleven/Mike Wheeler, Will Byers/Mike Wheeler

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2017-11-25

Updated: 2017-11-26

Packaged: 2022-04-03 05:00:50

Rating: Not Rated

Warnings: Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings

Chapters: 8

Words: 10,079

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

it's been three years since the gate closed, and none of them talk about it anymore. it's easier, somehow, to pretend it never happened, like if they all focus on grades and the arduous facts of life, everything is okay.

but it's not okay. el and will are both plagued by the memories of the upside down, the monsters, and the labs, haunted by their past. it's drawn them closer to one another, and further from everyone else.

*this is a modern AU of stranger things, and it's set 3 years after season 2.
tags will be updated as chapters are added!*

it's also being posted to my tumblr, which is a mess of all my favourite things, so come and say hi to me!

nonbinaryelevens.tumblr.com

check out the [official playlist!](#)

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

hi loves! this fic has been up on tumblr for a while but I'm finally putting it here! it's the first fic i've ever posted to ao3 so I'm sorry if the formatting is a little broken!

hope you enjoy dead stars!

there was something tragically beautiful about the night sky, that the stars were all so incredibly brilliant in their light, but some were dead before they could be seen.

mike had explained this to el, once, when they were lying, side by side, hand in hand, on the forest floor. she'd still been so bemused by the concept of it all, the sky so vast and stretching in comparison to the boxy white ceilings of the rooms in which she grew up, and even to the cracked wooden beams of hopper's shack; lost in memories with a furrowed brow before he broke the silence.

“you know, some of the stars are so far away that they're already dead before the light reaches earth.”

the dead leaves tickled el's ear as she looked over, wondering at how mike's face was so scantily lit by the moonlight, his bright eyes staring straight back at her. without a word, her confusion reached him, a visible breath curling into the autumn sky before he continued.

“the universe is huge, el. massive. and the light takes so long to hit us that some of the stars we can see have exploded before we see them. we see what they used to look like. isn't that cool?”

el still didn't understand, but smiled softly anyway, rolling her head back to watch her own breath float away into the night sky.

the world was too big for her, let alone the universe.

it's been three years since the gate closed, and none of them talk about it anymore. it's easier, somehow, to pretend it never happened, like if they all focus on grades and the arduous facts of life, everything is okay.

they don't play d&d anymore.

it feels like a thousand years ago most of the time, their cracked hearts having slowly healed beneath the band aids they'd shoddily pushed over the holes. normal kids, doing what normal kids do. going to parties and playing video games and preparing for prom.

it doesn't feel like a thousand years ago tonight, not to eleven. not when her belongings are flung around the room, again. not when fear dances behind her eyelids, again. not when she's shaking and crying into hopper's shoulder, again, with her fists curled in his shirt.

and jim tells her it's okay, like he has every night this week, and that it'll pass, and she quietly lies back down with the teddy bear he bought her when he first took her in, and watches him smile at her from the doorway. she knows it's fear behind his hooded, sleepless eyes, but neither of them mention it, to each other or anybody.

it's a shared knowledge: anniversaries bring some intangible monsters back from the deep.

mike drives up to the house at 7 the next morning, like he always does. they get coffee every day before school, at the same coffee house, where all the baristas know their names and their orders off by heart. mike: mocha with an espresso shot; el: hazelnut latte. but today, the purple rings beneath el's eyes and the dark cloud in her head prompts her to croakily ask for a shot of espresso in hers as well.

mike had noticed it in the car: the way the usually quiet el had become essentially mute, the way she seemed intensely interested in

the trees that passed the window, the way that her hand had flinched minutely when he reached over to hold it. he had said nothing, his heart in his throat and his mind running at a hundred miles per hour.

he worries at his lip as he hands over the cash for the coffees, picking up both as el links her arm through his and leans her head on his shoulder. the booth in the corner by the window is reserved for them, as always, and they slide in opposite one another with practiced precision, hands entwined with one another's, mike watching el's every movement as she stares out the window.

"stop," she mutters, turning not to meet his gaze but to stare into the swirling steam that rises from her coffee. she hears him gulp, and he hears her breath stutter as he looks down into his own drink.

"el, I just," a deep sigh, a hand squeeze. "you know you can-"

"stop. it's okay."

eyes lock, just for a second, just enough for mike to see the dullness that coats eleven's entire existence, before her eyes flick away once again. his denim jacket wrapped around her shoulders seems to envelope her, her short mop of curls falling over her eyes as she takes a sip of her drink and cringes at the added bitter taste.

it's only when the little bell on top of the door rings again and catches his attention that he realises what's wrong.

will moves with shuffling footsteps, hood drawn up over his head, face pale and eyes the same dull colour that el's have adopted. he smiles weakly at the barista as she takes his order and hands him his coffee (his, too, with an extra shot of caffeine just to keep him functional), before he lumbers over to the booth and slides in next to el.

"hey," he says, and mike can hear how hard he's trying to make everything seem fine. "you do the math homework?"

mike nods and takes a sip of his coffee, glancing at the two tired teenagers sat across from him over the rim of the cup. he watches eleven and will exchange glances before, in synchrony, lifting their

own drinks to their lips. it's that time of year, and he hadn't even remembered.

it's as if eleven and will have an entire conversation without words, both finding an odd comfort in the shared nightmares and the bags under their eyes. it's been three years, but they both wonder if it will ever be long enough.

2. Chapter 2

Notes for the Chapter:

hey, so here's chapter two! i hope you're enjoying it!

the ride to school is quiet, apart from the soft chords of some obscure indie band playing on the car's speakers. will helped eleven make the cd - taught her how to rip songs and burn them to discs so that she could wrap them up with tiny bows and lots of stickers and give them to mike on his down days; he has less of them than he used to, but el still has a pile of cds beneath her bed, ready to go, just in case. it comforts her, sometimes, to think that maybe she can still save him, even when the town of hawkins, indiana, is not being invaded by shadow monsters or demogorgons. that maybe, just maybe, she can save him when he can't save himself anymore.

but today, the music floats past her ears without recognition, and her focus is not on mike. in fact, her focus is nowhere in particular, seemingly lost in the forest without a thought for her sanity. her eyes have been trained on the same spot on the windshield for ten minutes now, mike notes, and will is forcing himself awake in the backseat. one hand moves from the wheel to rub absent-mindedly at the back of his neck, glancing between the road, the passenger seat, and the rear view mirror (a useless attempt to catch a moment of eye contact with one of the other two teenagers in the car, clearly to no avail).

“h- hey, movie night after school?” mike manages, lips forming a false smile beneath furrowed brow.

will hums, almost too low for mike to hear, and shrugs his shoulders lop-sidedly, his whole body sagging even further into the faux leather seat. try as he might, it doesn't sound as optimistic as intended, but mike seems to ignore it and move on, so he doesn't correct himself.

before long, they're pulling into the parking lot of the school, and mike is ever-so-lightly resting his hand on eleven's leg to 'wake her up' from her aimless, zombie-like stare - she turns to him with wide eyes, before glancing out of the window to see the school and grabbing her satchel from the footwell (she doesn't remember the

journey, but pays it no mind).

the cold air hits el's face as she clicks the door open and slides from her seat, and she swears, just for a moment, a dark cloud visits the horizon (she pays it no mind, shakes off the ominous feeling that weighs so heavily on her shoulders; push it down, it's all in your head). legs that suddenly tremble beneath her weight carry her to the opposite side of the car, and she opens the back door to pull the groggy will byers from his seat. neither of them want to be here, and they both know it - but their silent shared thoughts agree: it's better to be here than anywhere else.

"it's not your fault."

hopper's voice, through the heavy air. will was in the hospital, his body weak and frail. if she had never run away, if she had been there from the start to guide the party--

"it's not your fault, el. stop blaming yourself, please, and eat your eggos."

but the smell of her favourite food caused bile to bubble up into el's throat, and she pushed the plate away as she stood, all five foot three of power and unresolved trauma, to softly patter to her room.

"not hungry."

the sheriff's face had contorted through confusion and pity, before settling on something akin to a father's worry for an ailing child. while he'd never admit it, the terror of losing her had crossed his mind many times in the few months since he took her in. god, not another one.

the door of her bedroom closed, softly, softly, softly, as she slowly sank down to sit with her back resting on the wooden bed frame (the floorboards splintered beneath her fingertips, embedding themselves into soft flesh, and she paid it no mind).

crying silently was a skill she had almost mastered, but the soft squeaks that escaped her lips with every sob seemed to resonate more

within the wooden shack of home than they ever did in the lab.

but the tears seemed unavoidable; thirteen years old, with the world on her shoulders and enough guilt to break shoulders and force her to the ground. she pulled her knees up to her burning chest and buried her head between them - "my fault," she muttered, under her shaky breath. "my fault."

she had adopted the role of elder sibling for will as soon as it was safe for them to visit the house, and mothered him consistently when it was safe enough for el to join the party everywhere else. she always made sure he was happy and okay, and that he knew she was always there.

will did the same for her, but different- signing her up for tumblr so they could talk without having to involve the others, and he started sending her posts to put words to her feelings.

they began to know each other perhaps better than they each could ever know themselves.

shared trauma is a bond that no one can break.

she squeezes his hand as he slides out of the car, and they both take quick, deep breaths before pulling their tried and tested masks over their questionable behaviour.

soft, matching smiles as they separate from one another, el reaching upward to plant a careful kiss on the edge of mike's lip as he unfolds himself from the car.

fingers entwine again, mike finding himself watching for any possible sign in el's features that she's not okay, but it doesn't come. not clearly enough to cause him more worry. instead, he tries to let it go.

the fingers of el's free hand tap at her thigh, rhythmic patterns burning their way into will's brain as he dawdles behind the couple into the school.

... ..

bathroom.

Notes for the Chapter:

that's the end of chapter two! please comment or message me on Tumblr if you have any criticism or feedback!

3. Chapter 3

Notes for the Chapter:

okay this chapter is a little bit more angsty than the last two so please please check the warnings! enjoy!

the click of the lock of the bathroom door, the softness of el's fingers ghosting across the back of his hand, the bracing draft that floats through the tiny window just beneath the boxy light fitting - will doesn't know what it is, or why it's happening, but he's suddenly shaking, sobs wracking his bony shoulders so hard they might break. he doesn't feel el catch him, but she does, of course she does, and her arms are around his waist before he can fall to the ground.

she wipes her bloody nose on her sleeve - legs not fast enough to catch his weight with hers, her mind took the fall without argument. in fact, a piece of it helps her guide him down, down, down, until they're sat, legs intertwined messily, will's fingertips scratching at the linoleum flooring until the little cuts beneath his nails bleed once again. hopper's words, once again, run through her mind.

it's not your fault.

but how could he say that, without knowing of the unbridled force of consequences, without feeling the weight of her own decisions threatening to bury her under eight feet of stone? how could he, he of sound mind and body, tell her that she had no part to play?

liar .

she takes both of will's hands in one of hers on her lap, the other rubbing circles in the nape of his neck with featherweight fingers. heavy breaths meld into one, chests rising and falling to the rhythm of the new-falling rain pattering on the tiny window.

still, she hopes, she can save him.

last year, she'd found him in the very same bathroom, shaking hands

bloodied and broken, matching train tracks running the course of the veins in his wrists but ever so slightly missing their destinations.

he was pale, but not lifeless; there was blood, but not too much; his eyes were dull, but not yet dead-- she could feel the life in him, through the pain that stung her eyes and sent daggers into her heart, and she held onto it with all the might she could muster.

her hands had shaken uncontrollably, stroking his hair and whispering that it would be okay and that everything would be okay and fuck, will--

it's not your fault .

but it was; he was her responsibility, and had been from the start.

tissue was wrapped around his wrists in layers and layers and layers, the sleeves of his sweatshirt rolled up to his elbows as he leant half against eleven and half against the toilet bowl.

mike's phone had buzzed in his pocket too many times to ignore, and he'd thrown himself from class, making some excuse about his baby sister and kindergarten, and pulled out his phone to find five missed calls. *from el.*

el never called. it was always texts, or voice messages when she was happy, or when her hands shook too much to type. but she never **called** .

“floor 2. bathroom. need you. ride home.”

“el, what’s--”

“floor 2. bathroom.”

click. beep.

two minutes later, he was crashing through the door, out of breath and mind swimming and too many things happening at once. he saw el's trainers first, soles tainted with red that did not belong.

“el, what the--”

“he's okay. hopper.”

“no, el, he needs to go to a hospi--”

“no hospital, mike. hopper.”

“el---”

“home, mike!”

the fear and pain seethed from her lips as she hauled will's skinny, half-conscious frame over her shoulder and began to push past her uncooperative boyfriend to reach the door.

“drive, mike. take us home.”

eleven takes his face in both hands, forces him to look her in the eye. if she can save him, everything can be alright. if she can save him, she can allow herself to survive.

“breathe, will. safe.”

eyes flutter shut, forcing more tears to follow the tracks that trace his cheeks and onto el's wrists. deep breaths.

out.

out.

breathe.

safe.

laughter, slipping out of lips that bleed from the cracks where he's chewed too much, breathy and relieved.

“we... we're l-late for class.”

a sigh, as el's hands fall from his face so she can check mike's watch, that still hangs loose around her wrist.

“9-5-0. nine-fifty,” eleven mutters, brow furrowed in contemplation

as she weighs up the options. “fuck it.”

whole hand wraps around his larger one, and she drags him to standing before pausing to splash water on his increasingly confused face.

“what--”

“fuck class, will. fuck it.” her voice cracks in its softness, and he feels himself melt a little in her hands.

“what-- what do you mean?”

“i mean... gay movies and chinese food.”

a tired smile (half filled with sadness, half with admiration) tugs at will's lips so determinedly that he lets it spread, head ducking towards his chest and his hair flopping over his face. a shrug, and he's a million miles away from the car and coffee and fog of the morning they're leaving behind.

Notes for the Chapter:

sorry this one was a little shorter; I felt like it reached a natural sort of ending so didn't wanna push it! hope you're still enjoying this!

4. Chapter 4

Notes for the Chapter:

oh god my writing is so angsty and I apologise for everything in this story goddamn. this chapter is also kinda long? compared to the last 3 but I hope it's still enjoyable!

out of the school, out of walls made of empty promises and loud noises, and into the cold air they step, soft relief washing over them both as they feel the first crunch of leaves beneath them. their arms are linked, a wall of solidarity, footsteps falling in perfect time, a dance meant only for broken souls and calloused hands; the first frost of the year is covering the ground, and the cold breeze hitting will's face brings a colour to his cheeks for which el can't help but be grateful.

the forest is quieter to walk through than the town, and both are thankful for the peace that it brings - but neither of them want to break the silence, knowing it may just be too much, instead settling into the sound of the occasional bird in a tree and the cracks and groans of the fall floor beneath their feet. they share a few glances, and a train of thought that just echoes through the trees and threatens to burn everything down.

the fear, the repetitive, never ending fear, that they will never be okay.

el has learned to push the fear down, to stifle it beneath layer upon layer of denial and friendship and feigned enjoyment in the hopes that one day it will all be real. an expert, precisely in the art of negation and careful contradiction. will, her observant student, is still learning.

shared trauma.

he feels as if he dies and is resurrected every day, every fibre of his body aching with the possibility of what could have been. of what he could have had, if everything hadn't happened. of what **he** could

have been.

it's no secret that he's been distancing himself from everyone but el, and has been, slowly, for years. lucas and dustin stopped trying last year, after the bathroom incident and his subsequent complete lack of communication despite their best efforts - he and mike had always been closer anyway, but even to his old best friend, he's become distant. el has become his only confidant.

shared trauma.

sometimes, she traces the parallel scars on his wrists that he still hides from his mother. they've healed well, but still shine slightly and spike up above his skin, like desperate grasping hands reaching to pull him downward. he feels them, pinching at his ankles, grazing his calves, inches from finding their target and dragging him beneath the ground.

el fumbles to pull keys from her pocket, hands slightly numb from the cold, and opens the door with a tilt of her head. as soon as they're in, will goes straight to el's room to grab every blanket and pillow and throw them on the ground in front of the tv, while el goes to make them both cocoa and popcorn. their regular routine, like clockwork, verbal communication completely abandoned.

she knows, logically, that he probably won't eat the snacks she sets out - he hasn't been eating much at all, recently. lunches are absent or uneaten, and offers from others are refused more often than not. his cheeks are a little more hollowed, his bones stick into el when she hugs him a little bit more than they used to -- he was already skinny, but she worries when she sees the change.

they both know some things are inevitable, but they both try to control everything nonetheless, curling their bloodied, broken fingers around any shred of power they can possibly reach.

for el, everything is neat and clean, just like hopper taught her all those years ago when he took her in.

but for will? it's what goes in his body, what he's allowed to consume and what he's not. it's the exact number of lines on his thighs and the

way he wraps them up before pulling clothes on in the morning. it's the way he pushes people away and controls those he has left.

el worries, constantly, and knows will wishes she wouldn't.

the popcorn is burning on the stove, and she doesn't notice it until a hand is on her shoulder and she's being shaken from a waking dream.

“shit! *shit!*”

she keeps shouting, grabbing the pan and clearly burning her hand as she moves it to the kitchen side and throws a towel over the flames starting to lick up around the blackened kernels.

“shit,” she says again, a little quieter this time, and begins to absent-mindedly rub at the burgeoning redness and doubtless blistering that now stains the palm of her left hand, “sorry.”

“are you okay?”

el looks up, and will's face is tilted to the side, the paint of soft concern and confusion mixing with the tiredness around his eyes, swirling purple and pink galaxies as he reaches to inspect her hand.

she pulls it away, a small, “fine,” falling from her faux-smiling lips as she grabs the two mugs and moves towards the stack of blankets on the living room floor.

a lot of the time, she hides the same amount that he does.

the room felt so small, as if the walls and the ceiling were collapsing in to trap her, a cage made of mortar and brick and wood. the lab was gone, the regimes and cruelty of her formative years present only in her memory. in flashes, behind her eyes, she could still see them - every tiny feature, every miniscule detail of papa's face bearing down on her, every corner and light fixture and the exact pattern of the linoleum. every hand that gripped her a little too hard made images dance atop her consciousness, leaving her to learn to shake off the feeling of strong arms dragging her away to some small room. back then, it was inescapable, normal even -- she'd never seen a child unlike her, never known anyone to live in peace, never believed

anyone existed but her captors and the smattering of other subjects she'd seen over the years. back then, the pain was everything, and she knew no other life.

the room was only collapsing for **her** , the brickwork breaking only **her** bones and screaming only against **her** skin. only **her** chest was compressed, only **she** couldn't breathe, only **she** could feel every fibre of her being tearing themselves asunder, one-by-one, seemingly begging to break free from the scarred soul inside.

and only she, alone in a quiet bedroom, every belonging floating around her, could feel the shockwaves pass through her body, and escape her wrists in huge red pulses.

she had seen no one but hopper for the three months since the snow ball, and all the hope had slowly left her. the gate had been opened and closed, and everyone was safe and sound from the demons inside, so of what use could she possibly have been?

no more demogorgons.

no more demodogs.

no more mindflayer.

the next logical step, clearly, was no more psychics, or whatever the hell she was. she had taken the mantle, as gladly as her veins had taken the sharp glass that she had pressed against them.

no more demogorgons.

no more demodogs.

no more mindflayer.

no more.

no more.

no--

everything in the room had fallen from their silent levitation in

unison, crashing loudly on the wooden floor when consciousness left her, followed shortly by two doors slamming open -- hopper's and subsequently el's -- and a slew of terrible curse words.

she woke up in the hospital.

he took her home as soon as humanly possible.

no one in the party ever found out, not even mike, and in her mind they never needed to know.

she knows what it is to hide everything. *she has done from the start.*

they settle into the copious blankets, pressed together from toe to shoulder, as el brings up netflix on hopper's shoddy laptop. musicals flash across the screen as she scrolls - the one thing, she's learned, that can actually make the great will byers feel something besides his own hell. he points at rent, she clicks, and settles the laptop onto the old walnut coffee table, surrounded by bowls of skittles, chips, and dry lucky charms (a snack they had bonded over at the very start of their friendship), as well as the two large cups of cocoa. **safe.**

his head falls onto her shoulder, his hair falling over his face but not obstructing his view. seasons of love starts, and he just sighs.

“what?”

“i just... i’m...”

“i know,” she breathes, and bites down on her bottom lip in contemplation while the music plays. it buffers, for a moment, and she turns to sit cross legged, facing will.

“what?” he says, face twisting with confusion and tiredness at el's burgeoning smile (it starts to reach her eyes, and that's so rare that he feels as if it pulls at his own lips).

“a bet.”

“a bet?”

“yes, *a bet.*”

Notes for the Chapter:

hey I hope you enjoyed that! or, y'know, that it hurt you loads because apparently that's my goal??? I didn't mean for that to happen haha

5. Chapter 5

Notes for the Chapter:

this is a waaaay less heavy chapter (even the flashback is fairly light!). it's a nice little break from the CONSTANT PAIN THAT I SEEM TO INFLICT

“a bet?”

“a bet.”

“a bet,” will repeats, a change in tone seeping into his words, a complex mix of confusion, intrigue, and a softened concern. there's a flash of something almost unrecognisable in el's eyes -- he could swear it was mischief -- and it excites and scares him at the same time. “what... what kind of bet? i really don't want to end up in a lake again.”

“doesn't count.”

“what d'you mean it doesn't count?”

“you bet yourself to do that.” el's eyebrow raises, incredulous, and she swears she sees a glimmer of a happy memory pass through will's eyes.

“oh... right,” he sighs, some part of him actually slightly disappointed in himself for the memory of that entire night. a drunken one, for sure, but he was sure he was happy. “so, serious-seriously, what are you on about?”

her lips painted with a smirk, el leans forward slightly, her shoulders curling towards will as if to shield them both from everyone who isn't with them. it's often how she speaks to him at school, in hushed tones and secret codes, and he doesn't even think about the fact that they're alone before echoing her body movements.

“come out.” her voice is soft, but cracks nonetheless, as if the world will crumble around her at the idea. she feels will jerk away from her ever so slightly, watches the fear and surprise swim through his eyes

just as suddenly as she had proposed it. “who can first.”

anyone watching the scene would swear that will's face could be submitted as some postmodernist film project, the silent transitions of confusion through fear through excitement through self loathing and straight back to fear again a sight to behold so beautiful it would be considered art. it would be captured on 8mm film, and it would win all of the awards.

he stands, and el flinches, but he walks to the kitchen in silence, leaving her bemused on the floor, *rent* still playing in the background, abandoned now by both of them. there's clattering and clinking before he's back, two glasses and a half-filled bottle of vodka in hand.

the bemusement doesn't leave her, as he slumps back down, pours a shot, and downs it, before locking eyes with her, a sudden scared determination seemingly taking him over from toe to head.

“will?”

“i'm ready. tell me what the fuck you mean.”

they were thirteen. it had been a year since he went missing, and he was hiding so much already. everyone was growing up too fast, and will, stuck in his trauma more than the others, was simultaneously being left way behind, and steaming ahead. having seen too much too young, stuck in his past while growing too fast to deal with it.

it always seemed as if none of the others quite understood, and while the party always rallied 'round if needed, the enthusiasm was beginning to ebb. naturally, will asked for help less and less as they seemed to become more and more tired of helping.

the world felt wrong before he fell into the upside down, and it felt so much worse after. will byers watched his friends bloom into themselves, watched them grow and change and look at girls like you're supposed to, watched them live their lives and gush over the new girl like lost puppies. max, the mysterious fiery haired californian who always carried a skateboard and dressed up as a serial killer for halloween. there was an admiration for her,

somewhere in will, but nothing more.

but then it happened again, and he didn't have a chance to think about why he'd rather be holding the hand of his best friend than the girl who was so intriguing to the others. he didn't have a chance to think about why he cared about the way mike's hair would fall around his face, nor how his lips would turn up at the corners in the rare event he was actually happy.

he nearly died, again, and he couldn't stop to work out what it all meant.

they were fourteen. it had been a year and change since he almost died for the second time. el was in school now with the rest of them, and the party was two bigger than it was before everything started.

a chance to breathe was granted to will, even if it was muddied with bad dreams and waking nightmares, and he could see everything through soft filters.

tearing his eyes away from things they naturally gravitated to became the norm. hawkins was always a small town, and kids like him never did well in small towns. the people would gossip, they would grumble, and they would learn a new target for hate.

will byers, the zombie boy, twice risen from the dead, couldn't be a little fag, too.

he couldn't be what they had told him he was, the little weirdo, the gay kid, the soft boy who draws his friends a little too intently on the corners of his math notes. but some twisted hand would keep it at arm's length from his control.

the laptop jonathan had bought him for his fourteenth birthday (somehow, with money from the few photos he could sell) had become a solace. there were people online who understood, who softly supported him from across the country, across the continent, and across the world. he would post his artwork, sketches of his friends and the woods and the birds that would land on his windowsill as he sat at his desk and failed to do homework, and people would respond.

people liked him, and it was nice.

zombie. gay. stuck in a town so small it still unironically has an arcade .

el's doe eyes stared straight back at him, still wild and wide as they were when they first met, clearly contemplating how to put her thoughts into words. it's been three years, but she's still quieter than anyone he's ever met, and still speaks in short sentences. it's adorable, mike tells her, and she feels as if there's too much to learn to learn it so late.

“will...”

“we're saying fuck it today, aren't we?”

a nod, eyes still trained on will's face ever intently.

“then...” a drink is poured, and passed with a shaky hand in front of the swelling sound of *today 4 u* playing from the shitty laptop speakers, “fuck it. take a drink, and let's talk bets.”

there's a flash of consideration, but it doesn't last long before she's wrapping her fingers around the dusty glass and throwing the contents down her throat with a grimace. the taste is something she will never be used to, she's sure, and the sound of will stifling a chuckle forces her head to snap up.

“okay?”

an oversized sleeve is swiped across her mouth as she nods yet again, and she softly sets the tumbler in the small space between two of the bowls on the table. she shakes herself back into reality, and pushes her hands into the blankets on which they sit.

“okay. thirty bucks on who comes out first.”

a smile, slowly, creeps across will's face in the same way that the alcohol slowly fills his veins. his head drops against his chest in a breathy laugh, before he pours two more drinks, the glass bottle placed carefully amongst the snacks.

“you really ready for that, el?” he grins against the rim of the glass, and raises his eyebrows with soft surprise.

“no,” she says, and matches his smile, “that's why it's fun.”

Notes for the Chapter:

yeah, getting distracted from trauma by drunken netflix is a very real thing, my babs. just a heads up that in this fix, my personal headcanons apply: will is gay as all hell, el is demipan and non binary (she/they/he pronouns but just really doesn't care; I'm using she/her in the descriptions for this), and mike is a v v v v v closeted baby bi

6. Chapter 6

Notes for the Chapter:

aaaaaand its angsty again, of course. never expect anything else from me for goodness sake. angst is my one and only true love. a couple painful touchy subjects but not too bad! hope you're still enjoying it

by the end of the film, the bottle is empty, they're both stumbling over the words to *seasons of love* and dancing awkwardly around the room. singing loudly, out of time with the music, they are more synchronised with one another than they are with the song playing on crackly speakers in the background, and the world outside seems to fade into insignificance. they are loud, so loud that their own thoughts are drowning, pushed under by the cascading alcohol-induced amnesia.

the credits roll, and el stumbles ever so slightly, grabbing a handful of lucky charms and shoving them into her mouth as she slams the computer shut (will startles at the sound, before collapsing into giggles and falling into the blankets).

the record player clicks as she flips a record into place from of her vintage collection of tattered vinyl, wobbly hands dropping the needle twice before finally reaching their mark; the opening chords of *boys don't cry* garnering a cheer from will as he holds his empty glass into the air. happy. safe.

it's like nothing hurts, and it's nice. it's like they're lone stars, in a night sky void of all others; free from the burden of memory and experience.

but then el remembers the chinese food she'd promised, and starts rifling through takeout menus.

why did she have to remember?

he'd skipped a couple of dinners a couple of times, said he'd already

eaten at mike's before he went home, or that he'd been too engrossed in homework to eat anything of any real value. when his mother worried, he'd reassure her that he was fine, she could even ask mike, and then he'd make a mental note to wear more figure-hiding clothes the next day.

it was fine, no big deal, and he'd had it completely under control---
until he didn't.

until one night, he was sat in his room trying to calculate the number of calories in the two spoonfuls of mashed potato, three forkfuls of string beans, and two bites of chicken. more than half of his plate had been left untouched, some transferred to jonathan's when his was left empty, but most down the garbage disposal when his brother wasn't watching- he remembered being glad that his ever-observant mother was working late more often than not. joyce worried, a lot, and will wished he could say she worried too much.

he wished she wouldn't worry at all.

he wished he didn't warrant that.

but that night, he panicked about triple digits.

that night, he cried until his whole body ached.

that night, he realised he had a problem that he didn't want to stop. he realised there was a world outside of his window that he would never be able to see through unclouded eyes. a shadowy filter would always cover everything to him. something would always feel *wrong* .

and when those clouded eyes finally got too heavy, and lids fell too hard upon their neighbours, he would fall again, screaming and scratching, into sleep. he fell deep, but felt empty, endlessly spiralling but only skimming the surface, constantly dying but still breathing - he screamed and screamed and screamed, and no one answered; no one saved him, ever. down the rabbit hole, and never back out of it, never escaping, never free, never *will* again.

he felt the breath leave his body, the darkened air suck the life from every fibre. he felt the cloud take him over, every miniscule piece of

him screaming with the weight of foreign intervention. he felt himself burning, every cell wrought with inside-out fire that brought him, screaming, to the ground.

he felt himself lose, over and over again. fail. fight and fight until there was nothing left.

he felt himself die.

again.

zombie boy .

again.

and again.

and again.

when the haze lifted, he was in his brother's arms.

again.

jonathan, holding him tightly, shaking him from the darkness. they were on the floor, and will could feel warmth slowly creeping from his forehead and into his eyes - blood, proof of life.

“it's okay, you're okay,” jonathan whispered, over and over, arms becoming the ground on which will's sanity would slowly, creepingly return. “everything's okay.”

“i'm sorry--”

“mom keeps telling you. no more sorries.”

“don't-- don't tell her, jonathan. don't tell mom.”

flopping back down into the mound of comforters and pillows, bottle of whisky in one hand and menu in the other, el leans her head on will's shoulder and refills his glass, pushing the shabby pamphlet into his lap as she goes. it's been overused, hopper still struggling to cook

more than eggos without setting fire to something.

drunk, but not completely out of her mind yet, she knows will doesn't want to eat. she's observed him, kept an eye on him, even if he hasn't noticed yet, and knows how little he eats. it's the little things, like the fact that it gets worse when he's got bags under his eyes or a bruise from falling out of bed. it's when he's quieter, and won't accept questions. it's when he acts like nothing matters, but el sees that everything matters too much.

on some level, the constant offers of food from her won't stop until he opens up about it -- considering almost everything else was shared between them, his consistent refusal was baffling. but above all that...

it's your fault .

she hums, nonchalantly, reaching for her phone and typing in the phone number of the restaurant.

“i'll order. what d'you want?” she slurs, ever so slightly, but that's good enough. the menu ends up on the table, and will unfolds himself to wander towards the bathroom.

“m not hungry,” comes a mumble from the boy, as the wooden door closes gently behind him. the paint is peeling, and a little more seems to flake away every time it moves.

standing again, moving back to the tiny kitchen with the phone and the whisky, she leans upon the counter and presses the call button. though he may not want it, she orders his favourite, and gathers the money from her pockets on the side.

a sigh, before she stumbles back over to the doorjamb of the bathroom. they are no longer floating in the stars, and the air is heavy. they drink more. they talk. they cry and laugh and eventually fall asleep wrapped up in each other on the floor.

the record ticks over.

Notes for the Chapter:

hey! letting you know that I read every reblog on Tumblr and appreciate every like, kudos, and comment ever left. I love you

7. Chapter 7

Notes for the Chapter:

ok like. barely any angst in this one. like 0.1 angst.
and it's all internal. it's chill. have fun kids !!

at three in the afternoon, after a full day of his mind wandering and worrying and doing backflips about the two disastrous teens, mike gets a text. it's hilariously misspelled, letters mixed up and repeated, and he worries more when he replies and she doesn't.

he can't get out of school until five, but he makes his exit as efficient as possible, cramming himself into his car and blasting the loudest music he possibly can. an odd mix of anger and concern mixes in his stomach, the red light of the sunset bouncing off his black curls and shining into his eyes. they don't talk to him; they never talk to him, and it hurts. it hurts to know that will and el are closer to one another than they are to him, that lucas and dustin and max have drifted away, that he's alone, again, in the cosmic sense of it all, even if no one has really left.

it passes through his mind that he doesn't blame them, that he doesn't matter that much anyway. he pushes it down, knuckles turning white against the steering wheel, fingers curling round and pressing into his palms. he's back to worrying, to thinking about everything that could have happened to them. he speeds a little down the road, has to swerve to avoid hitting a parked car, but his mind is elsewhere.

what if they've done something stupid?

what if they've hurt themselves?

what if it's happening again? what if they've been dragged back to that place?

the air is filled with possibilities, and mike can feel the panic rising in his throat. it's getting dark, the fall bringing with it the sun's early exit, and the cold air is seeping in through the cracked windows. the hairs on his arms stand to attention as he finally pulls up in front of

el's house, and he has to take about a million deep breaths before opening the door - the *what if* s echoing and circling and getting bigger and bigger and ---

it's like he's walked into the aftermath of an explosion. the table by the window is on its side, containers of fast food that presumably used to be on top upturned and spilling. a record is tick tick ticking over on the record player in the corner, broken glass is scattered across the floor, the couch is upside down, somehow, behind a mass of blankets --- and in the middle of it all, wearing socks and mike's sweaters, el and will are tangled together, deep in sleep. a sigh of relief barely has a chance to leave his lips before he sees the three empty spirit bottles, and panic once again fills him from head to toe.

there's dried blood on el's face --- that explains the mess, at least --- and the way will's sweater falls, mike can see bruises on his collarbones, and he panics. his brain moves a mile a minute and screams at him as he rushes to shake them awake.

el wakes with a shout, and the bowl of chips flies across the room, barely missing mike's head and hitting the wall behind him. will wakes up at that, eyes wide with shock, before collapsing into yet another fit of giggles and sinking back down. within a couple of seconds, mike watches the two fall back into each other, somehow so close they almost become one entity, one entity with two laughs, screeching almost maniacally as the sunlight dies. "mike!" they shout as one, and laugh into each other, their bellies filled with alcohol and sparing love.

mike shakes the fact that they both look so beautiful from his mind, his brow furrowing and eyes closing as he runs his hands from his hairline to his chin. a clap, loud enough to separate the el-will mess, before he pulls them to standing, one by one, met with grumbles and grunts and "dude, come on"s. will falls twice, once cracking his hip against the coffee table and once, heavily, into mike -arms around his neck, bright, toothy grin so close to mike's face that he can feel his friend's breath heat his cheek.

"c'mon, will. let's get you home."

"but *miiiike!*" will whines, sound drawn out through pouting lips. "i

don't *wanna* !”

one arm around will's waist, holding him up, mike's free hand pinches at the bridge of his nose. he won't admit it, that the proximity is nice, because will's skeletal form is digging into his hipbone, and his drunkenness is making him heavier. “no. your mom'll worry. she probably already is.”

“she *always* worries!”

“are you gonna walk or am i gonna carry you?”

mike uses the sternest voice he can, but stumbles, stuck in between the girl he's been in love with since the first time he laid eyes on her and the boy who---

no, he pushes that down, just as he always has.

will pushes him away, holds his hands up, suddenly grinning again, slurring out words that don't make much sense but that mike assumes mean that he'll make his own way. a part of mike misses the warmth of will against his skin, but he pushes it down, backing up to open the front door. “c'mon. both of you. *el!* c'mon!”

will grabs her, they giggle, and stumble together, imitating mike as they go, complete with pouty faces and whiny voices; the sober boy can't decide whether to smile or grumble, and settles on something in between, an apathetic smirk that doesn't reach his eyes.

nonetheless, he finds himself glancing in the rear view mirror every chance he gets while driving. he admires the way the streetlamps light both will and el's smiling faces, the way their hair is lit in shades of gold. the stars have started to bloom into view, the sky an ever-stretching expanse of nothingness, a backdrop for a play in which they laugh into the night, one that mike could watch forever.

the drive is short, and the driveway is empty when he puts the car into park. joyce is probably working late and jonathan probably with nancy as usual -- the house is quiet, a blessing, as he practically drags will from the car, through the front door, and through the house to his room.

the slender boy giggles and pokes at his face the whole time, grinning in a way under which mike struggles not to melt.

he pushes it down, just as he always has. on some level, he doesn't think he'll ever let it out, but knows he'll never be happy if he doesn't--- he settled into that truth years ago.

carefully laying the skinny boy down on his bed, mike is lost in thought as will giggles uncontrollably. will reaches up again to drunkenly poke mike's cheek, but is pushed back down as mike hurries around the room, placing a trashcan by the bed (just in case), and a glass of water on the little chest of drawers. above the bed still hangs an old corkboard, covered with photos and sketches and old memories --- the corner of the crayon-doodled will the wise still peeking out from beneath beautiful photorealistic pencil recreations of seemingly every person will has ever known. a reminder of old times, crawling beneath the surface of the new. mike stares, for a moment, eyes settling on a perfect rendition on himself, before will's slurring voice pulls his attention away, unintelligible words drifting into the air. absentmindedly, he mutters, "what?" as he bends down a little to hear him better, but he's met with both of will's hands cupping his face. both boys stare at one another with wide eyes, and mike's suddenly terrified.

"mike!"

"...yeah?"

"michael!"

"yes, will."

"mike michael mike wheeler!"

"that's--- what, will? what?"

he watches will's face twist strangely, just for a second, resembling something strangely close to fear or pain, something like the way he'd looked when he broke his arm in fifth grade, or when he finally woke up after the bathroom incident. mike feels panic rise again, but it doesn't have long, because will's grinning again, and monologuing,

and repeating himself over and over, like he's trying to make sure the words don't disappear back into his throat.

“i'm gay, dude! i'm so fucking--- tell el i owe her thirty bucks--- i'm so fucking gay, like---”

“what?” mike chokes out, but it doesn't stop the raging train that is will, even as he releases mike's face from his grasp and he starts talking at the ceiling instead of the friend at his bedside.

“---boys are so cute and--- fuck, shit, don't tell mike but like, mike is so cute--- shit, you're mike, don't tell mike--- mike! don't tell mike but like... i'm so gay, shit, because fuck, i'm just--- i hate hawkins, y'know? 'cause it's all bullshit, and they make ya hate yourself and it's all bullshit and y'know? fuck. just fuck it. just fuck it...”

the words get slower, taper off towards their ends, until he's practically whimpering out syllables. his eyes are closed, and then he's out like a light, and mike is standing alone in his room.

mike is standing alone in will's room, examining everything with pinpoint focus, noticing now that the sketch of himself on will's wall is more precise than the others. he's watching the boy's chest rise and fall, and finding it impossible to match his rhythm. he's trying to wade his way past the returning panic, the ensuing battle so harsh that his ribs burn.

he squeezes his burning eyes shut and runs away.

he pushes it down, like he always has, but it bubbles up between his fingers and screams against his every movement.

he runs out the front door and slams it behind him.

he tries to push it down, but it begins to take him over, and he can't breathe under the weight of it.

he slams the door of the car and reverses out of the drive like they're being chased, waking el with a start. she begins to mutter a question, before slipping away again.

he can't push it down anymore. it wants to be free, to stop him

putting every syllable and movement through a filter for the world around him.

he chokes, holds his breath, and ignores the way his eyes burn and leak as he tears down the street.

Notes for the Chapter:

I hope you liked that chapter! I am building up to shit, I swear, it's just taking me a whole damn long time! so keep your eyes peeled and keep wondering if this FIC WILL EVER END!

8. Chapter 8

Notes for the Chapter:

oof. I got really anxious about this chapter, so it's taken me for forever to post! sorry about that. hope you lovely people are still enjoying this! please give feedback if you have any ♡♡

the air is cold when el wakes up. it stings her skin like a viper, creeps under the comforter and nips at her ankles until she is shaken from sleep, and she pulls her knees to her chest to radiate heat. the morning haze coats the room in layers, slowly falling away one by one with every blink, focus steadily settling in waves. through the fog, she sees mike - elbows resting on knees, fingers tangled into his black curls where his hands are clasped around his head. he's sat in the armchair by the window, and she can see the dust settle on his shoulders just the same as it does on the aged leather.

his head snaps up upon the shuffling of the comforter, pure stress quickly morphing to a soft, tired smile. it's off by a tiny margin; el can feel the tension echoing from his sleepless bones, the way they creak as he moves. it's how his shoulders are hunched in the same way they are when he has a bad day. it's the bags under his eyes that look like they could fit all of the world's troubles. it's the tiny wounds around every single one of his fingernails where he's worried at the skin. he's hurting, somehow, somewhere, and she can feel it.

“hey.”

his voice, crackly and deep, breaks the gentle silence of the morning, but she can't quite place the emotion behind it. she replies with a flash of a sleepy smile, sitting up against the chipped headboard, and reaches for the glass of water on the bedside as mike stretches and stands. it tastes like regret, and worry, and the tiny diluted remnants of alcohol left swimming between her tastebuds; it tastes like the way mike is avoiding her gaze, and the clock that doesn't tick anymore, and the dust floating through the air, seeming hesitant about settling on any solid surface. her heart jumps into her throat and plays jailor, holds her words captive in her chest.

slowly shuffling to sit on the edge of the bed, mike clears his throat, shooting down the silence before it becomes uncomfortable. his eyebrows are knotted in contemplation, fingers still picking at one another. they're at war, el thinks, except no one ever wins.

"we're skipping school today," he says, and she can see the red lightning bolts in the whites of his eyes, "okay?"

she nods, her arms outstretched and begging to envelop his aching bones; there's something about being close to him that helps her breathe, like without him there a piece of her lungs begins to shrivel and die. the light that filters itself around the tiny debris floating in the air turns his pitch black hair a slight red, the curls swishing as he shakes his head into his chest, staring at his fumbling fingers. he looks like regret, and worry, and the clock that doesn't tick anymore, and the silence is back. it's heavy, and harsh, and sticks needles into the back of her neck as mike's eyes start to water. nothing is said, nothing needs to be, not yet, as she hesitantly wraps her arms around his shoulders, holding him closer and tighter the more he shakes and sobs into her.

the two questions remain, nonetheless: *what happened last night, and what broke mike wheeler?*

maybe it's nothing, she thinks, just a coincidence of a tragedy of a bad day. his head still rests against her chest, quivering ever so slightly beneath the fingers that thread through his hair. she can feel every piece of him begging to be fixed, and all she can wish for is her hands to turn to glue, to patch every piece of him until she can hold him, whole and perfect, covered in fresh glaze.

if only it were that simple, to fix a broken soul; instead, they hold each other tight, mike's fists balled in the comforter, el's in the back of mike's shirt, feeling too much and not enough and never again all at once, until their breathing synchronises and relaxes into rhythm. "it's okay," she breathes against his curls, her throat filling with everything she wants to say but still doesn't know how to. when she plants a kiss to his forehead, he tastes like regret, and worry, and the clock that doesn't tick anymore, and all at once, if his pain were an instrument, she could write a symphony.

“d’you wanna talk about it?” she murmurs, soft and quiet, and moves to wipe mike’s tears away with her thumbs. he peers up at her through his overgrown bangs, eyes tired, but glistening with the dew of every sleepless night, every skipped heartbeat, every unspoken moment that has ever passed him by. it’s as if he grieves for them, all at once, silently, as he shakes his head softly into her hands.

“do you want some cocoa?”

a nod, this time, a soft hum dropping from his lips, and el smiles sadly as she presses a kiss to his forehead and throws her legs over the edge of the bed. the floor is cold beneath her bare feet, but it goes unnoticed as she shuffles towards the kitchen. the living room is tidy, and clean, and her breath hitches with some unexpected uncertainty - something happened last night, and it wasn’t like that when she went to sleep.

what little she remembers is pondered endlessly as she sets about making the drink. the ingredients are pulled from the cupboards without need for hands, her promise to hopper to keep her powers under wraps all but abandoned in her mid-morning half-hungover haze. somehow, it doesn’t much matter anymore; everything is controlled and precise, and besides - all teenagers lie to their parents, right? will does, and mike *definitely* does, considering they seem to know nothing true of his life past the age of twelve.

it seems stupid, it occurs to her as she sets the pan on the stove, that it’s so easy to lie. it came to her, slowly, beginning with simple omission and spiralling into hiding every piece of herself. *friends don’t lie* , but they do, they always do, and the world cannot be boiled down to such simple phrases. *friends don’t lie* , but to err is human, and to lie is human, and to fail is human, and *she* is human, unbelievably and irrevocably, no matter what else.

her hand screams in pain as she picks up the milk, and it spills as she drops it on the side. a memory returns; running the thumb of her other hand over her scorched palm, she recalls it - burned popcorn, scorching heat, will’s worry and her lie.

bit by bit, piece by piece, it creeps back to her. she pours the milk into the pan; she remembers the drink. she turns the stove on; she

remembers the singing. she mixes the cocoa with sugar just the way mike likes it; she remembers will spilling the entire contents of his mug on his chest and laughing for fifteen minutes straight before letting her find him a sweater from her room. it's all fuzzy and poorly defined, like she's looking upon it all from under a dark veil, but it's there, and it's real, and as she walks to the living room with a cup of cocoa in each hand, it keeps unravelling.

the dining table is slightly more chipped than it was. the armchair is slightly out of place. there's a garbage bag by the front door that seems to almost collapse under the weight of its contents. and there, by the coffee table, that's where it was. that's where they were, tangled in each other, the first drink of the night in their blood-stained broken-fisted hands. that's where it happened.

the bet .

it was a stupid idea, in retrospect. a pipedream of a plan; a broken idealistic view on everything that they both surely knew would fail. the world is rarely as simple as drunk minds deem it to be, but it's fun in the moment, even though regret eventually takes hold and ruins absolutely everything ever built.

the bet.

as if anything as complex as sexuality and gender in a small town could ever possibly be boiled down to simple competition. but it was fun in the moment, a complex pulley system that could lift the weight from their shoulders for even a short time.

the bet .

it feels like a twisted joke, the hand they've been dealt. it hurts, as deep and searing as the screaming palm, and all at once, it seems inescapable again.

mind swimming once more in the endless void, she makes her way across the warped floorboards, only to find a sleeping mike, fists curled up in the pillows as if he would be thrown from the face of the earth if he were to let go. he doesn't even look peaceful when asleep, his entire body almost painfully tense, brows still knotted together in

some odd form of fearful anguish that never quite seems to leave him. the bed seems to creak under the weight of his baseless pain when he curls his body tighter into itself, and her heart breaks again - whatever happened, it was surely *her fault* , again, again, again, even if she still cannot recall hurting him. boys like mike wheeler, she thinks, aren't made to survive people like her, in the same way that wood-beamed houses aren't made to survive hurricanes.

setting the cups on the little table by her bedside, she presses a chaste kiss to his sleeping cheek, revelling in the minute way he relaxes at the touch, and takes his keys from his discarded jacket.

it's okay , she whispers under her breath, trying to force it in amongst the constant yelling of *it's your fault* that echoes and reverberates until her own conscious thoughts seem to be overwhelmed. she refuses to collapse under it, even as she feels her eyes burn and her cheeks become wet as her feet carry her to his car - there are more important matters at hand than self centred fear and the painful beginnings of doubt. in her head, like a mantra, she repeats it: *you do not deserve to be upset.*

Notes for the Chapter:

woop. yeet. m'dears. its. yup. I have no idea how long this thing is gonna be (I am a messssss) but I hope you keep enjoying it all the way up to the END!!!

Author's Note:

i hope you're enjoying it (at least as much as anyone can enjoy this much pain)! i'm drawing from my own experience with mental illness, trauma, sexuality, and gender issues, in my best effort to make this as realistic as possible, as painful as it may be!